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ABSTRACT

As rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing have increased in recent decades, the percentage of children and fathers who live apart from one another has also increased. Yet our knowledge of how father involvement affects children's well-being in these situations is quite limited, since most research on fathers and children has focused on intact families. This brief summarizes key findings on the relationship between father involvement and child outcomes from that larger body of research, as well as the relatively small group of studies that consider fathers who live apart from their children. Main findings are as follows: (1) children benefit from positive relationships with their fathers; (2) fathers can positively influence their children's development by assuming a significant amount of the child care tasks; (3) a father's parenting style has implications for child well-being; (4) fathers' involvement can affect children's social development, cognitive development, and academic achievement; (5) limited research has been conducted on the relationship between child outcomes and involvement of fathers who do not live with their children; (6) provision of child support is related to children's cognitive development, academic achievement, and behavior; and (7) research findings on the association between frequency of father-child contact and child outcomes are mixed. (Contains 14 endnotes.) (EV)

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Child TRENDS
RESEARCH BRIEF

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The Meaning of Father Involvement for Children

Fathers are involved in their children's lives in a multitude of ways that go beyond the traditional roles of "economic provider" and "playmate." However, few studies that include fathers tap all aspects of fathers' involvement in children's lives. Furthermore, the quality of father-child interactions is not as frequently studied or as well understood as is the quantity of father-child contact. This is especially problematic given the large number of U.S. fathers who do not live with their children. Researchers are now calling for an expansion of research to address aspects of father involvement that assess both quality and quantity and that examine direct and indirect forms of father involvement in children's lives. This brief summarizes key research findings on new ways of thinking about father involvement and the roles that fathers play in children's lives.

Fathers can be involved with their children in more roles than just the provider role.

Researchers have identified three main ways that fathers are involved with their children:[1]

- Fathers can have direct contact with their children (engagement);
- They can make themselves available to their children even when they are not in physical contact (accessibility); and
- They can take responsibility for their children's care and welfare, again regardless of physical proximity (responsibility).

This view of father involvement is applicable to fathers who live with their children as well as to those who do not. For example, a father -- regardless of geographical distance -- can be available to his child by arranging for regular phone calls or visits, writing letters, getting a beeper so that he is always available for a phone call from his child, or participating in school activities.

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Quality counts!

Researchers contend that it is important to distinguish between the quantity and quality of father involvement.[2] If a father is not able to have frequent physical contact with his child yet provides warm, stimulating, and positive contact when possible, children can still benefit from father involvement. Conversely, if a father has frequent opportunities to interact with his child but does not engage the child in positive ways, the child may not fare as well. By gathering information about the type, quantity and quality of father-child interactions, we can better understand the effect of father involvement on children's development.

Different styles of parent-child interaction can contribute in important ways to children's healthy development.

- Researchers find that often father involvement is of a different nature than mother involvement. For instance, espe-

cially when children are young, fathers are more likely to engage children in play activities, while mothers tend to spend more time in routine caregiving activities with their children.[3] Furthermore, mothers' and fathers' play styles have been found to differ on average, with fathers engaging their young children in more physical and stimulating interaction during play.[4]

- However, despite differences in the type of activities that mothers and fathers engage in with their children, researchers have concluded that mothers and fathers influence their children in similar ways with regard to the development of morality, competence in social interactions, academic achievement, and mental health.[5] One area where fathers may have a disproportionate influence is on children's gender role development.[6]

Dads are not just substitute moms.

As mentioned above, mothers and fathers often provide children with similar things (e.g., love, attention, guidance), but they do not always interact with their children in qualitatively similar ways. There may also be some roles that are unique to fathers. Below are listed some of the major roles that fathers assume with regard to their children, and key research findings about these roles and activities with regard to their influence on children.

- **Dad as Economic Provider.** Traditionally, fathers have been seen as the main source of financial support and protection for the family. Even fathers who do not live with their children are expected to contribute to the food, shelter, and clothing of their children by providing child support payments. Being unable to provide economic support may limit father-child interactions in the short run and hinder child development in the long run.[7] Fathers who work long hours also may be limiting the actual amount of time available to interact with their children, however they may also serve as important and positive role models for their children. There is some evidence that being an economic provider promotes the positive development of children.[8]

- **Dad as Friend and Playmate.** Some have characterized fathers as the "fun parent." As mentioned above, in terms of relative frequency, fathers devote more time to playing with their children than do mothers. However, fathers' play styles are sensitive to and shift with the development of the child. When children are young (i.e., from birth until approximately age 4), fathers tend to engage their children in tactile, physical, and stimulating activities. As children enter middle childhood (i.e., the elementary school years), fathers are more likely to engage their children in less physically rigorous recreational activities, such as walks, outings, and private talks.[9] This is true for fathers who live with their children as well as those who do not.[10]

- **Dad as Caregiver.** Fathers can -- and often do -- provide many forms of affection and comfort to their children. Indeed, most of the research evidence shows that fathers are just as warm and nurturing as mothers. Fathers also engage in as many kinds of child care activities as mothers, although mothers on average provide more child care. Fathers are the main providers of child care for children whose mothers work outside of the home.[11]

- **Dad as Teacher and Role Model.** Fathers, like mothers, assume the responsibility of teaching their children what they need to know to survive in the world. These life lessons may come in the form of teaching a child about letters, shapes, and numbers when the

child is an infant or toddler, or helping a fifth grader with his or her homework, or coaching a child (at any age) on how to get along with others. Oftentimes fathers teach by example. For instance, a father can teach a child about empathy by being sensitive to others in the child's presence. There is some evidence that suggests modeling certain behaviors, such as church attendance, can have positive effects on long-range outcomes for children.[12]

- **Dad as Monitor and Disciplinarian.** Contrary to popular belief, fathers are not the sole or main disciplinarians of their children.[13] Particularly in the first two years of life, mothers are more likely to discipline their child than are fathers. Nevertheless, fathers also fulfill this important role of monitoring and regulating child behavior.

- **Dad as Protector.** Fathers monitor their children's safety by organizing the child's environment and eliminating hazards from the child's path. This seems to be a particularly salient role to fathers whose children live in inner-city neighborhoods.[14] Fathers also may teach their children about health risks and how to keep themselves safe when the parent is not around (e.g., teaching them not to talk to strangers).

- **Dad as Advocate.** Fathers look out for their children's welfare in many ways, including ensuring their children's needs are being met by outside institutions. A recent study found that fathers' involvement in their children's schools is linked to positive school outcomes for the child, including higher class standing, more enjoyment of school, and a lowered likelihood of grade repetition, suspension or expulsion.[15] The same study found that 27 percent of fathers in two-parent families and 46 percent of custodial fathers attended at least three school-related activities a year. In addition, 31 percent of fathers who do not live with their child but saw their child at least once in the past year participated in at least one school event in the current school year. The study also found that fathers who are single parents are just as involved in their children's schools as are single mothers. Of course other factors, such as school policies and practices, the father's work schedule, and the family's economic status and family structure may contribute to how involved a father will be in his child's schooling.

- **Dad as Resource.** There are many ways that fathers fulfill the role of resource or "behind the scenes support." For example, men can provide emotional support to the mothers of their children, and help mothers in practical ways with the care of the child -- whether they live with the mother or not. One study found that mothers who are supported in their breast-feeding efforts by their husbands continue to breast-feed their children longer than those women who do not receive similar support.[16] Fathers also may provide children with links to extended family and community resources. This role may be particularly important to fathers who do not live with their children. By introducing the child to extended family, a father can facilitate the transmission of family history and cultural knowledge to his child. Especially for older children, the connection to community resources can help build the child's own social capital.

This research brief was written by Tamara Halle, Ph.D. It is based on literature reviews prepared by Angela Dungee Greene, M.A., Tamara Halle, Ph.D., Suzanne Le Menestrel, Ph.D., and Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D. for the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. The views expressed are those of Child Trends; no endorsement by the government should be inferred.

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